

GUEST COLUMN

Restoring Our Natural Resources After Katrina

By Governor Haley Barbour

(Photo)

One of the greatest benefits we have as Mississippians is the opportunity to experience the outdoors throughout the year. For many outdoor enthusiasts across the state, the approach of crisp autumn weather signals the time to store our fishing gear until next Spring and prepare our hunting gear for the coming seasons. For others who simply enjoy being outdoors, opportunities abound this time of year for bird watching, camping or simply enjoying a relaxing stroll through the woods. Truly, Mississippi is blessed with some of the most abundant natural resources and beautiful outdoor scenery anywhere.

By now, everyone is aware of the incredible toll Hurricane Katrina took on our state, especially South Mississippi. The high winds and massive tidal surge brought inland by this record storm destroyed homes, decimated property and stole lives, but it did not destroy our spirit. While the most immediate efforts of my Administration are to restore normalcy to the lives of South Mississippians by providing housing, utilities and other public infrastructure, I am not forgetting the great need that exists to restore our natural resources across South Mississippi and Gulf Coast.

As Katrina raged toward the Mississippi Gulf Coast in August 2005, its first attack laid waste to our pristine barrier islands, carving away at the island footprints and washing away trees and other vegetation. The islands are now substantially smaller than their pre-storm condition, some having lost as much as 25% of their land mass. The sand dunes have been scoured and leveled, rendering the islands now essentially at sea-level. What were once massive stands of trees sweeping the breadth of the islands are now only dead, brown toothpicks. From an aesthetic point of view, the islands suffered greatly, but even worse is that the Gulf Coast is now defenseless without the protective barrier provided by these islands.

The devastation we can see above the water is certainly immense, but the waters off our Gulf Coast also suffered. The Mississippi Sound is a prolific fishery, home to hundreds of species of sportfish and valuable commercial species we enjoy as seafood. Unfortunately, Katrina wreaked havoc with our extensive artificial reef network as well as the wetland marshes and seagrass beds in the shallow areas along the Gulf Coast. These reefs, marshes and grass beds provide essential habitat and serve as fertile nursing grounds for marine life such as shrimp, oysters and crabs, as well sportfish such as snapper, trout, grouper and many others. Thousands of acres of reef structure and marshes were destroyed by the storm, and the Mississippi Department of Marine Resources estimates that 90% of our seagrass beds were lost to Katrina.

On land, the environmental impacts of Katrina were no less damaging as those experienced offshore. Inland marshes and coastal forests were heavily damaged. Nearly 60,000 private forest landowners experienced timber damage resulting from the storm,

and more than 2,000 acres of estuarine and vegetative wetlands were destroyed. These valuable forests and wetlands provide habitat for thousands of species of marine life in addition to waterfowl and species such as deer, turkey and quail. Freshwater fish populations that inhabit South Mississippi were also significantly damaged.

Restoring these natural resources can also be extremely beneficial to our economy. A strong natural resource base is a major part of Mississippi's quality of life. That is something other states don't have and we need to use it to our advantage. We need to maintain quality fish and wildlife habitat not only for the sake of conservation, but for future generations and as a means to recruit business, industry and even physicians.

Hunting, fishing and wildlife viewing generates over \$55 million in state sales, fuel and income taxes, support more than 12,000 jobs in Mississippi. The ripple effect of this is \$1.2 billion on our state's economy. It is a fairly simple equation - wildlife enthusiasts mean jobs in Mississippi in areas that have made the effort to maintain and promote wildlife-associated types of recreation.

While much of the human and natural resources of South Mississippi were heavily damaged by Katrina, the spirit of our people was not broken. We've made great strides to address the natural resource damages resulting from the worst hurricane in America's history. With the help of President Bush and our congressional delegation, hundreds of millions of dollars have been made available to begin the restoration of our barrier islands, reefs, coastal forests and wetland marshes. And, I expect much more federal funding to be available in the future.

An extensive plan has been developed to address these essential natural resource needs. I anticipate the restoration effort to take at least ten years and will cost nearly \$7.5 billion. Our plan proposes to restore the barrier islands to their 1900 footprint as well as the forests and other vegetation that once existed on their surface. We will restore over 1,000 acres of wetlands and thousands of acres of forests, and tens of millions of dollars will be directed toward the restoration of our saltwater reefs. In addition to natural resources, funds will also be available in the future to rebuild docks, piers and marinas damaged by Katrina so that anglers and tourists can once again have full access to the bountiful fish resources of Mississippi's Gulf.

While it will be an expensive, tedious and time consuming process, we will restore the South Mississippi and coastal ecosystems to ensure fish, wildlife and waterfowl have the opportunity to thrive and flourish once again. And, we will ensure that outdoor enthusiasts and tourists continue to have the opportunity to enjoy the rich offerings of Mississippi's great outdoors.

Haley Barbour
Governor

Editor's Note: Governor Haley Barbour has a long-standing record on supporting conservation programs and has personally supported conservation groups for the past seventeen years.

